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SUBJECT: STEINMEIER TAKE TWO: FOREIGN MINISTER ATTEMPTS TO
RISE FROM THE (POLITICAL) DEAD

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FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

11. (C) SPD Foreign Minister and Chancellor-candidate Frank Walter Steinmeier injected life into the SPD's flagging electoral campaign in his rousing June 14 party convention speech. Steinmeier reinforced his determination to become "the chancellor of all Germans" and called upon the party faithful to take up political battle against a possible Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) coalition. Steinmeier -- clearly shaken by the party's drubbing at the June 7 EU Parliament elections -- said it was time for the SPD to return to its political roots and at the same time capture Germany's political center. Steinmeier leveled criticism against the CDU/CSU for their management of the economic crisis and indecisive leadership but fell short of naming Chancellor Merkel or Economics Minister Karl Theodor zu Guttenberg personally. The SPD has 104 days to bounce back from political stasis before the September 27 national elections. Steinmeier's speech and the party's political platform were steps in the right directions towards mobilizing the party base. It remains to be seen, however, whether the SPD can market and sell its ideas to a skeptical German electorate who seem content with Chancellor Merkel's political and economic stewardship.

"LAST SUNDAY WAS NOT A GOOD DAY - IT WAS RUBBISH"

12. (SBU) Steinmeier launched the party's June 14 convention with a fiery political speech, which had comeback overtones. Clearly shaken by the SPD's recent electoral misfortune and ongoing poor polling results, Steinmeier as well as SPD Party Chairman Franz Muntefering expressed their anger and frustration with the party's inability to market and sell its political concepts. Steinmeier's speech sought to leave the past behind by reassuring the German electorate that only the SPD, and he personally, can offer direction and leadership during the current economic crisis. Steinmeier's main theme was to prevent a CDU/CSU-FDP (black-yellow) majority government. To rousing applause, Steinmeier told the party delegates that "Black-Yellow must not gain a majority, since the radical market economy that led us into the crisis cannot be the answer to the crisis." His speech aimed to highlight the SPD as the party for social justice and job creation and preservation as well as to emphasize its rejection of radical market economic solutions. The party platform, which was adopted unanimously, contained several policy initiatives, which the SPD will continue to trumpet throughout the campaign: a national minimum wage of 7.5 euros (\$10), increased funding and equal opportunities in the education sector, an increase in renewable energy sources, a sales tax on stock market transactions, and a renewed pledge to

continue the phase-out of nuclear power.

POLITICAL REACTIONS FROM THE STANDS

13. (C) The response from the party faithful and media to Steinmeier's speech was overwhelmingly positive. SPD Parliamentarian Johannes Kahrs told Poloffs that the convention lifted party morale and restored confidence in Steinmeier's ability to challenge Merkel. Like other SPD members, he dismissed the significance of the EU elections as a negative indicator of the SPD party's electoral fortunes, assessing that traditional SPD voters normally shun EU elections. SPD Chief of the Caucus Policy Planning Staff Volker Meier said that the SPD needs to highlight its political and economic achievements in the Grand Coalition, including that SPD programs and initiatives are primarily behind Germany's response to the economic crisis. The Greens -- the SPD's favored coalition partner -- praised Steinmeier's speech for hitting all the right notes. The CDU's Secretary General Ronald Pofalla did not hesitate to accuse the SPD of moving further to the left in an effort to steal votes from the Left Party (although the SPD largely views the Left Party as a fading threat in the next parliamentary elections on September 27).

COMMENT - CAN THE SPD BOUNCE BACK IN 104 DAYS?

14. (C) Steinmeier's rise from the (political) dead, if it is

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more than a passing phenomenon, could not come at a more opportune moment for the SPD. With the SPD's extremely poor results in the EU Parliament elections and Steinmeier's approval ratings in free fall, the party faithful were thankful that Steinmeier delivered a fiery speech designed to energize and mobilize the party's base. Although Steinmeier will take comfort from the party faithful's lengthy and rapturous applause throughout his speech, he will continue to remain constrained by his roles as foreign minister and vice chancellor in a coalition government with Merkel's CDU. Steinmeier took significant steps to distinguish himself from Merkel's approach and claim credit for the SPD's role in responding to the economic crisis. The SPD's election campaign has now begun in earnest. The question is whether Steinmeier can sustain this momentum. According to the Chief of the SPD's International Division Achim Post, the SPD will also be engaging former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who, he described, is "like a tiger, pacing around his cage," waiting to be deployed. Steinmeier must return now from his day of glory to a very challenging reality. End comment.
Koenig